

Divers recover at least 180 bodies

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By Edward Harris
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DAKAR, Senegal — Divers smashed the windows of the capsized Senegalese ferry MS Joola and hauled out victims of one of Africa's worst ferry disasters. At least 180 bodies have been recovered from among more than 730 people believed dead.

Wailing relatives — some collapsing in grief — cried Saturday for news of the missing.

Barricades held back crowds who stood vigil by the hundreds overnight at the main naval base in Dakar, Senegal's capital — waiting to know, for some, whether whole families had perished.

"I have been waiting 22 hours for information!" Daouda Diot, seeking news of his wife in the ocean ferry's sinking, shouted at military police who were fending off the distraught family members at the base.

The crowds took care of women who fell to the ground in the rising anger, tension and grief. Some dropped in dead faints or shook uncontrollably — sobbing and crying of missing mothers and fathers.

By midafternoon Saturday, divers had pulled at least 180 corpses from the ferry, which turned on its side, then capsized in a fierce Atlantic Ocean gale Thursday night.

Only 62 among the 796 passengers and crew are known to have survived — all rescued by fishing boats in the first hours, after what for some were hours clinging to the overturned hull.

French and Senegalese search planes and vessels converged Saturday in the area of the disaster, in blue seas under hazy skies.

The MS Joola was on its way to Dakar from Senegal's fertile southern region of Casamance when it capsized off Gambia, a miles-wide former British colony surrounded on three sides by Senegal.

France, Senegal's colonial ruler, said it had lent a naval rescue plane, a military helicopter and divers and two ships to help Senegal's military.

After spotting corpses bobbing inside the submerged interior, divers shattered the windows and began tugging bodies through, said Mamadou Diop Thioune, a coordinator with a French-funded marine center whose divers are helping lead the search.

Retrieval was going quickly, Thioune said. Searchers have said they expect to find no

one alive.

Most of the dead are believed still trapped in the ferry, caught when the vessel flipped in the choppy waves in just minutes. Survivors spoke of listening to the screams of those trapped inside.

French diplomats said they believed 12 of their nationals to be onboard. Three Spanish tourists, a mother and her two children, were also missing.

Most of the rest were believed to be Senegalese, many of them traders bearing dried fish, mangoes or palm oil from Casamance for sale in the capital. Dakar fish peddlers, tears in their eyes, waited

Scores gathered at Dakar's main hospitals. Most came to see if their loved ones were among the few rescued who were named in lists posted on the hospitals' walls. Most found only disappointment.

"I haven't closed my eyes since yesterday," said 33-year-old Mariama Daje, among the grim-faced throngs outside the naval base, unable to tear herself away or sleep before she heard of her young son.

Senegal's flags flew at half-staff in the second of three days of national mourning. President Abdoulaye Wade promised an investigation into the disaster.

Angry Senegalese cited media reports the ferry, designed for no more than 600 passengers, was dangerously overcrowded at 796. The ferry had only recently returned to service after a year in repair. Witnesses claimed it was listing heavily to one side when it set out Thursday from Casamance.

The tragedy was one of Africa's deadliest maritime disasters.

On May 21, 1996, at least 500 people died in the sinking of the MV Bukoba on Lake Victoria. On April 29, 1994, an estimated 300 people drowned when an overloaded ferry traveling from Mombasa island to Mtongwe on Kenya's south Indian Ocean coast capsized when passengers rushed toward the exit before the ferry docked.

The Senegalese ferry had been the prime means by which many citizens crossed between the north and south of their country, in part because of the tedium of border checks through Gambia. A violent two-decade-old independence movement in Casamance, often targeting travelers, also made many feel the roads were unsafe.

The Joola itself had been a "symbol of continuity" between north Senegal and south, said Jean-Paul Diatta, a 24-year-old Casamance Senegalese who had seven members of his extended family aboard the Joola.

"We still have solidarity, for the most part. But now we're sharing grief," Diatta said.

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